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The Mighty Ducks and The Marketing of Sports Merchandise

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Michael Eisner, the latest gentleman sportsman of our time, announced this week that the new Disney entry in the National Hockey League would be named after a film, and be called "The Mighty Ducks" of Anaheim. They will play in a facility called The Pond. And so with one sweep of his sleazy pen Eisner has degraded hockey and infringed on a fifty-year-old baseball cliché. "Ducks on the Pond" will never again sound the same.

One wonders what will happen in Miami with Wayne Huizinga's entry into the NHL. Will they be the Blockbusters, or will they go with Miami Ice and run endless Don Johnson look-a-like contests?

As to the Mighty Ducks, in addition to sounding silly, it sounds remarkably close to the Almighty Bucks, which is what drives Michael Eisner and the Disney Empire. The decision to go into hockey was yet another dollar driven move, by which the Disney Empire will reap profits from direct sales and more important the marketing of merchandise. The ice mice will inundate Southern California, then Central Florida, and finally the nation and the world.

This is not small potatoes. The San Jose Sharks sold \$127M in merchandise last year alone, largely due to their attractive logo and color scheme. You see Shark merchandise all over the country worn by people who haven't a clue as to the way to San Jose, but they love the teal and black, and the shark with the broken hockey stick in its mouth. The Chicago Bulls sold \$30M last year, while in baseball the non-existent Colorado Rockies were fourth in baseball merchandise sales.

Merchandising and licensing has become an enormous business. In 1985 \$5.5 Billion in licensed merchandise from all sports was sold in the United States. Last year that number had more than doubled to \$12.1 Billion. Last year each member of the Major League Players Association received checks in excess of \$60,000 as their share of the licensing sale royalties.

Minor league teams are also getting into this business as the consumer looks for something new and different, and of course colleges have been in the business for years. The college market reached \$1.5 Billion in sales last year.

Sixty-seven percent of all American households have at least one item with an NFL logo on it. And the range of products has become mind boggling. It is not enough to sell caps and shirts anymore: Full uniforms, shoes, bags, watches, telephones, videos, credit cards, toilet seats, license plates, bumper stickers, coffee mugs, neckties, scarves, baby clothes, and even underwear are available in the marketplace.

And it's no longer just sports fans who buy this stuff. Many who wear team logos do not know what the team is, nor what sport they represent. There are certain hot colors with black and silver the biggest seller. The Colorado Rockies went with black, silver and purple to achieve their success, while the Chicago White Sox jumped to the front of the pack in baseball sales when they changed to black, silver and white. The top seller in the NFL is the silver and black of the Raiders, and number two in the NHL is the silver and black of the Kings.

The sales boom has been aided and abetted by the availability of the merchandise. There are national outlets for the products, most teams have catalogue sales divisions which can be reached through a toll free number, and there are specialty shops run by the teams.

Sale of merchandise accounts for as much as ten percent of team profits. For those who think that the market is becoming saturated, hold on, because the college market has a long way to go, while the overseas sales have just begun. Back up the money trucks as this stream of revenue begins to overflow its banks.

A few weeks ago the future could be seen in Atlanta at what was billed as the biggest sports show in the world, naturally called the Super Show. It was a four-day extravaganza at the Georgia Superdome where one could look ahead. The landscape was cluttered and ugly.

In any saturated market the unusual is developed to attract greater attention. Paul Sporn of Russian Authentics had \$80 jerseys and \$400 jackets from hockey teams like Russian Dynamo and Sokol Kiev. The Shaq was dominant, although he was only there as a 15-foot cardboard cutout for Reebok, and Spalding offered a Shaq backboard that had a cracked look.

The baseball people were offering a new line as well, with several teams having changed their logos and uniform designs:

the Angels, Mets, Mariners, and Reds. This practice of logo change and color change is likely to be the wave of the future.

The other new merchandising area coming on very strong is sport art. Long dominated by Leroy Nieman this area has opened up with a number of talented artists doing everything from player portraits to ball parks to pop art with sporting themes.

Beyond all this are the tennis shoe wars and moves by corporations like Nike to dominate the entire sports scene. But that is another story.

What is clear is that in sport the bottom line, remains very much, the bottom line.

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